

The Basics of Community Organizing

- Form a core group: Identify people who are committed to improving conditions for your community and who would be interested in initiating a community organizing effort.
- Identify an issue: At a meeting of community members interested in working on an organizing effort, identify an issue that everyone agrees to. (See handout entitled, “How to Organize and Facilitate a Community Meeting”).
- Identify a mission and goals: All organizing efforts or campaigns should have an overall mission that clearly describes its purpose and what participants hope to accomplish with it. There should also be short-term, intermediate-term (optional), and long-term goals that are specific and achievable.

All campaigns have two kinds of goals: external goals and internal goals. External goals are the public goals: the policy you want to change, the legislation you want passed. The internal goals are your organizational and base building objectives: how do you build your organization and get more people involved.

Tip: Do not have more than one or two goals at one time. The short-term goal should serve as a stepping stone for the intermediate goal. The intermediate goal should serve as a stepping stone for the long-term goal. Develop a timeline for the goals. Remember to celebrate when goals are reached!

- Identify allies: Who will be helpful and supportive of your organizing efforts? Identify individuals, groups, institutions, etc. that have influence over the issue on which you’re working. How are you going to gain their support?



- Opposition: Will there be opposition? If so, who will they be and how will you deal with them?
- Develop a blueprint or strategy: What is your general plan for accomplishing your goal? In developing a strategy, identify appropriate *tools*. Examples of tools are demonstrations; meetings with elected representatives; calls, faxes, letters, etc. to a targeted legislator, company, agency; press conferences, letters to the editor, and other media outreach.

Tip: There are many tools to choose from, though not all will be effective for your organizing effort; use a combination that best advances your goals.

- Decide on concrete activities: These should be very specific. How many calls, letters, faxes etc. do you want to generate? How many press conferences do you want to hold? How many lobby days do you want to organize?
- Timeline: Working backward from the end of the campaign, what do you want to accomplish at each stage of the campaign.
- Recruit People: The heart of your organizing effort is people. Engaging and retaining people in the initiative are an on-going effort.

Tip: In doing any type of outreach, it is essential that you're able to talk clearly, succinctly, and energetically about the campaign and the issue. Connect the issue to people's lives and be prepared to answer questions. People will not get involved if they can't understand you.

Tools for recruiting people include:

1. **Tabling** - Set up a small table with literature about the issue and campaign, and talk to people about them. Find out if a permit is required for tabling before doing it.
2. **Flyering** - Distribute literature about the issue and campaign, and talk to people about them. Don't be aggressive.
3. **Promoting** - Speak about the campaign at cultural events, religious gatherings, sports events, meetings of other groups, etc. Make sure to get advanced approval for your announcement.
4. **Surveying** - Collect the opinions and sentiments of individuals on a particular issue or range of issues. The survey should be related to your campaign.

Tip: Surveys provide an opportunity to open a conversation and possibly engage people in your campaign. The survey should be anonymous (don't ask for names), short, focused, easy to understand, and easy to analyze afterwards, as you'll want to use it to inform your work and/or to develop a report. Surveying can be done while tabling, canvassing, flyering, etc.

5. Canvassing - Knock on the doors of people's homes to talk to them about the campaign and issue. Don't get upset if people are unresponsive or curt. Remember that you're knocking on their door unsolicited.
6. Ask current members to invite other people they know.

Tip: In doing outreach 1 to 5 above, remember to: go to where the people are; always ask for names and contact information, but do not be insistent if people are not willing to offer that information; include contact information in all the literature; and always have an event (meeting, rally, etc.) that you can invite people to.

People who are or become involved in the organizing campaign will have various skills and expertise. Ask them to be open about their strengths and encourage them to take on tasks that they are best suited for. That is also one way to keep people engaged; it feels good to be useful! Of course, people should also feel comfortable to work in areas that they are curious about and would like to acquire skills in, preferably with guidance and support from others.

○ Keep and Engage People:

1. Stay in touch with one another - Regular contact is vital. Face to face is best.
2. Welcome newcomers - Introduce them to members of your group. Consider appointing greeters for large meetings and events. Call new contacts to invite them to events. Help people find a place in the organization. The most appealing approach is to say, "Tell us the things you like to do and do well and we will find a way to use those talents."
3. Act more, meet less - Most people dislike meetings. It is better to focus most of your time on doing activities.
4. Keep time demands modest - Make sure people don't feel overwhelmed. Keep expanding the number of active members to ensure everyone does a little, and no one does too much. Work out realistic time commitments for projects.
5. Do it in twos - Working in pairs improves the quality of communication, makes work less lonely, and ensures tasks get done.
6. Provide social time and activities - Endless work drives people away. Schedule social time at the beginning or end of meetings. Also, it's a good idea to periodically organize social and community building events.



7. Provide skills training - Provide skill-building workshops or incorporate an education component into the general meetings. Simply pairing experienced and inexperienced people will improve the skills of new members.
 8. Generate consensus - Consensus is a decision-making process through which groups work towards a decision that can be agreed to by most, if not all, participants. Before a decision is made, all opinions are carefully considered, including ones that are different from the majority. Though this process can be more time consuming than decisions made by majority vote, it also promotes greater investment in and commitment to a group. It is important to have consensus throughout the organizing effort. Participants should always feel that they have a voice or they may not stay involved.
- Identify materials: Identify materials that you'll need to perform different tasks. For example, a microphone for a press conference or speak-out, a car or bus to travel to a meeting, easel paper and markers for a community forum, a table for tabling, etc. Most materials will require money, though some may be donated or borrowed.

Tools to raise money include applying for grants from foundations; fund-raising events (e.g., parties or cultural events); and collecting donations from the community and businesses in the community. When doing fund-raising, be clear on what the moneys will be used for.

Tip: Not everyone will agree on every issue or technique. If the disagreement is regarding an issue that is not generally considered critical, be open to “letting it go” and to staying involved in the campaign. Also remember that all those involved have the same goals and that there is always more than one right way.

Tip: Be wary of uncooperative or egotistical individuals. Egos should be discouraged while leadership is encouraged. The two should not be confused. Leadership requires the willingness to work collaboratively and cooperatively, and the ability to encourage and support the work of others.

- Assessment/Evaluation: To be able to learn from and improve an organizing effort, it is necessary to reflect on how it has progressed and what outcomes it has had. Everyone involved in the effort should participate in the evaluation. Some questions to ask are: What were the goals of the effort? What goals have been met or not met and why? Have goals that have been met improved conditions for the community? What were the expectations and did they materialize? Why or why not? What strategies and tools have been effective or ineffective? What additional resources are needed? What groups have been most supportive? What have been the greatest challenges?